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## A PROBLEM OF AMERICAN CIVILIZATION

In those far-off days of a few years ago when conversation between Europeans and Americans was not full of implications of victory, defeat, and death, one of the questions usually asked of a travelling American by his European host was: "What has your country done for art? We acknowledge your statistics of trade and commerce, but what have you done in literature? We admire your skyscrapers, but where is your national music? You have the greatest railroad mileage in the world, but where are your eminent painters and sculptors? Have all your great universities together produced a poet?" To this far-reaching question, which ill concealed a searching indictment of our American civilization, what answer did our countryman give?

It depends partly on standards, of course, and there have been some answers that were proud recitals of moderately good names exalted by first-rate praise; some answers that named one or two men of indubitable genius; some answers that were frank admissions of the important charge; and some answers that were unwilling excuses based upon the general accessibility to us of all the various arts of our race and of the world, and our consequent prompt acceptance of the treasures thus within our grasp. We were English-speaking, for instance, and Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning, were really ours as much as they were England's; the eye understood the universal language of color and contour, and we had bought, none more lavishly, many a masterpiece of painting whose departure from Europe meant there a national protest; our orchestras played Beethoven or Richard Strauss, as well as the best, and our Metropolitan opera put any in Europe to shame; etcetera.

Now I have always felt that when one is surprised by a charge, the wise thing is not immediately to deny or immediately to accept the truth of the accusation. The wise thing is to think about it and see whether the charge is really true. What are the facts in this case?

The facts appear to me to be these:—In the fine arts we have advanced perhaps furthest in painting, and most of our best men

have been trained in Europe. The latter point seems to me, on the whole, of minor significance. The main point is that we may offer one name of the first rank,—Whistler. The men who, after an interval, follow, hold their own with distinction; yet I do not believe that we can maintain that we have produced an American school, of whatever training, that ranks with the great schools of the past or of the present. In sculpture we name St. Gaudens, and in music MacDowell, and here and there another, but our sculpture and our music do not equal our painting. In the field of architecture we have built many admirable structures,—dwellings, offices, railway stations, hotels, and hospitals,—but we have yet to create a Parthenon or a Cathedral of Chartres. In literature we have names in abundance, and our American literature is a real thing, different in motive and in part in technique from the parent English. But of writers genuinely great, who may stand beside the great men of all the countries and of all the centuries, how many, if any, shall we name? Frankly, the day has gone by when we may venture to proclaim our Longfellow, our Bryants, Lowells, and Whittiers, as among the world's greatest. Indeed, so thoroughly have we recognized this, that we ourselves have begun rather seriously to underestimate these bearers of the torch. But we do put forward Edgar Poe as a real poet of international consequence—incited thereto somewhat by European praise; and we have, through the same incitement, many uneasy wonderings as to whether Walt Whitman be not, after all, the great American poet. In fiction we have one man, at least, who may hold his own in any company,—Hawthorne, whose artistic individuality, although not broad, was so sure and true as to warrant the great word great. Personally I incline, although I be in a hopeless minority, to place squarely alongside of him Henry James. And unless ardent liking blinds my perspective Howells stands near. But do I seem hopelessly old-fashioned in thinking that our younger men do not rank with Fielding, Turgenev, Balzac, Meredith, Hardy, Conrad? And in modern drama, do we dare seriously to add to the impressive list of Ibsen, Björnson, Strindberg, Hauptmann, Giacosa, D'Annunzio, Echegaray, Hervieu, Brieux, Shaw, Galsworthy, the names of Clyde Fitch and George M. Cohan?

So, roughly speaking, the count stands. To say that our architects, novelists, and the rest of them, have nevertheless truly interpreted American life and met its needs, is an answer which, instead of carrying conviction to our European questioner, really admit his contention. "Precisely", he says. "American life *is* truly represented by its art."

What then? Are we going to take refuge in the assertion that the distinctive qualities of our civilization, our prosperity, our home-making, our righteousness, our happiness, are things above and beyond the reach of art,—things inherent, things so self-expressive that they need no interpretation, things that are, so to say, their own art, the art of life itself, superior to the product of a few chosen individuals? For if American life be the special American art, then it does not need the extraneous help of a peculiarly gifted genius here and there. Such a general and collective art would not only be superior to the accomplishment of professional artists,—it would be supreme. Shall we say that?

Our European critic—and I am not setting up a man of straw—is not daunted by that change of front. We were talking of real art, as the word is commonly understood, he urges, and we could not effectively reply to his question. Now we have wholly altered the question by giving it a figurative meaning, and instead of saying fairly whether or not we had a certain thing, we have merely said that we had something a great deal better. He points out this exchange of logical horses in the intellectual midstream, and then proceeds to deny up and down the validity of our new argument. Becoming positive instead of negative in his phrasing, he tells us that we have political corruption, wastefulness, and graft; that we are unable to suppress lynching; that we have long endured poor roads, the very first means of communication; that our railroads lead the world in accidents as well as in mileage; that our legal machinery is so complex as to imperil its functions; and, most destructive of all, in respect of our ideal claims, that we are given over to the pursuit of the dollar, a nation of shrewd money-getters, where the true desire of our youth is not to be President but to be a multimillionaire.

Now there are many replies to all this. Perhaps the most obvious is the truism that in Europe there is no lack of extremely eager seekers after the shilling, the mark, the lira, the franc, and the ruble. But I distrust heartily the *tu quoque* argument. It is too truly an admission to say to anyone: "You're another!" Reasoning is not perceptibly advanced, when, if a man has called you a whited sepulchre, you retort by calling him a calcimined tomb. It then merely becomes a question of how many dry bones you both are concealing, when one is enough to establish the charge. That argument will not serve.

Another answer is that all this might once have been true or partly true, but that it is true no longer; conditions are getting better; graft was exposed by the muckraker, and a great moral awakening was the result of his impassioned scraping. It may be so. I, for one, doubt the validity and the permanence of superimposed moral arousings and sudden conversions. "These violent delights have violent ends", as Shakespeare notes. The true awakening comes in times of crisis, like that of the Revolution, like that of the Civil War, like that of the War with Germany, and these awakenings have as their supreme function the preservation of what we already hold; it is only as a by-product, perhaps, that we gain greater advantages to boot. Anyway, to declare that we have already reformed is only to throw the blame back upon our fathers, and not to explain how the blame came there.

Of course, all these alleged failings of ours are sensationalized even more at home than abroad. But no one knows America who does not know that the heart of her people beats true. We have, I profoundly believe, no national ailment, no national discontent, that is not also a human ailment, a worldwide discontent. Common-sense should forbid us and our critics from pressing what is really a terrible accusation,—as if a whole nation were composed of conscienceless scoundrels. Yet there is some truth in the charge of low ideals: we all know so well, that it is unnecessary to consider point by point how much we have of extravagance, corruption, carelessness of life, the law's delay and the disregard of law, lack of far-sighted prudence, and sheer commercialism.

Let me offer a reason why we have been misunderstood. Our nation has expanded, and we have been vitally and properly

interested in our unexampled growth and have talked about it as there is no reason why we should not. But to discuss expansion involves measure, and that means numbers. Our shorthand way of expressing prosperity thus by means of figures has led us to transfer values to the figures themselves and to speak of millions as if millions were virtuous facts instead of statistical symbols. And further, as expansion implies larger and larger, we have learned to regard "largest" as a sort of necessary ideal and to make it a species of *summum bonum*. I don't say that other peoples may not have much the same kind of habit, but it has worked into our blood. Our judgment of the virtues of cities is too frequently expressible in terms of population, and every city that legally bears the name seems to regard it as a civic duty to increase and multiply, as if numbers meant happiness, or as if Athens and Florence and Elizabethan London had not gained imperishable glory with a poor hundred thousand or so of inhabitants. I must confess that as a loyal son of a certain western city I rejoiced when a recent census forbade us to speak longer of the place as the largest city in the state, and compelled us to speak of it as the best.

I need not multiply instances, but here is one that comes home to me. Ask the average university man what his *alma mater* is doing and he is likely to reply with figures of its increase in the number of students. Increase in the number of students is not even synonymous with increase of intelligence; it almost invariably means less efficient teaching, unless endowment keeps pace with numbers, and it practically never does. Our great universities are overcrowded, and we ought to be thankful to Amherst and Stanford, which set a limit on their numbers. But here, as in a thousand other things, we keep on talking in terms of progressive figures, and foreigners have misjudged us accordingly.

To sum up the general situation, I think it fair to say that while our intelligent European has lacked access to the whole truth, not knowing our counterbalancing virtues, and deeming our offhand speech exhaustive of our mentality, he has yet laid his finger on the raw: our art is not to-day the art of a great nation, our errors are to-day at odds with our national greatness.

And now, if I can, to reason out the cause and to inter its sequence, the future effect. Let me begin by giving the gist of a bit of actual conversation. A frank Englishman once argued with me when I was working in the British Museum on Elizabethan quartos. He took me to task for our municipal government and for our lynch law, and more than hinted that an American who held his country's honor dear had better stay at home and right the wrongs which could not but be admitted. "A man like you", he said with that subtle flattery which always inheres when a man is compared with his own self,—“a man like you ought not to rest satisfied until he has done his best to remove the reproaches from American civilization. That is the work for an American.” Well, when a professor has saved up money enough to take a trip to Europe, and instead of careering joyously from Paris to Monte Carlo, has taken Bloomsbury lodgings and worked hard over eye-wracking texts, he feels that he has accumulated merit, and when challenged regarding his course the worm will turn. I answered: “But assuming that I am fitted for scholarship, why have not I as much right to devote myself to my chosen field as an Englishman has? You cast a double burden on an American when you insist that he shall occupy himself whole-heartedly with his country's affairs, and at the same time bring his scholarship up to European pitch. I can't hold my own in my profession unless I stick to it, and it is very probable that if I went in for social reform I should make a mess of it. And there are others in the same box.” An anecdote ought to end with the discomfiture of the speaker's antagonist, but this one does not. The effect of the conversation was to set me thinking, with the results which I am trying to state.

The great and inevitable drawback to American civilization is that *it is an advanced civilization superimposed upon savage conditions*. Prior to their crossing the Atlantic, the first settlers of this country, we may reasonably conclude, were men of about the ordinary culture of their day, accustomed to the opportunities of good citizens—if not in all religious and political matters, certainly in the things that stood for the education of the spirit and in the things that represented the average comfort and well-

being of the middle-class man of the day. They carried on their duties and their recreations, they read and they studied, and they thought in terms of a well-established civic life. When they could not obtain the one thing needful,—religious freedom or adventure, or whatever it might be,—they gave up their participation in the developing civilization of their time and emigrated to a dangerous wilderness where was the one thing needful,—but little else.

Consider the character of the change that came over these devotees of an idea. Leaving a place where the problem of physical existence settled itself with no more than normal difficulty, and where their troubles were mainly vexations of the spirit, they came to a place where physical existence itself was a problem, and where material troubles demanded instant and engrossing attention. Trees had to be cut down, shelters built, seed planted, and life itself defended from hostile attack. It was more than a change from comparative comfort to positive discomfort. It was a violent wrench to that profound part of a man's individuality, his habit of thought; it was an overwhelming challenge to his very way of *belonging* to a given environment. The change took him from the latest generation that was enjoying the advantages of other men's progress, and put him into the earliest generation of pioneers dependent on themselves. His unremitting hard toil to gain the indispensables of living, his constant caution, his limited horizon, his sufferings,—these things, despite the strong religious stimulus, and the strong sense of freedom, held down the colonist's mind to very concrete things. His material preoccupations were in conflict with the memories that he sought to keep alive, and with the tastes that perforce he let die. Manual labor and an unceasing round of manifold duties must have tended to make his ordinary conversation centre upon things close at hand. And even if something so precious as divine guidance seemed also close at hand, to focus the mind upon the routine of labor and upon the routine of worship is to help in the creation of a special type of civilization very different from the normally advancing civilization in the native country that has been left behind. To superimpose an advanced civilization upon savage conditions is of course to



get the better of those precise conditions, but it is also to get the worse of that precise civilization.

These forebears of ours, I know, had books, and they had minds above felling trees and ploughing fields. But people cannot keep an advanced civilization going full tilt when they are not only removed from the communal centres of that civilization, but are carrying in addition the burden of the primitive pioneer. And, moreover, even if they had the power to keep somewhat in pace with the developing culture of the home country, the fact of a parallel civilization going on may be as much a deterrent as a stimulus to the latent talent of the transferred civilization. For if you can import excellences from home, why not do so and save all your energy for the peculiar tasks of the new abode? Throughout our history, for instance, the steady output of English literature has supplied a great part of our keen American demand for intellectual resources. In short, our predecessors were mainly doing what our cultivated European reproached present-day Americans for not doing: they were bending every energy to making the new land habitable in the highest possible degree.

It may be objected that this part of my explanation is too easy: of course we could not expect that the first colonists should do a day's work of manual labor and then devote their leisure hours to creating poetry, music, and painting; but those early days did not last forever; the time came when the American *had* leisure; why didn't he devote it to art? The explanation is not far to seek. A habit lost is not always easy to regain, even with a superior race such as we may justly maintain our forefathers to have been. We must consider the effects upon the second and third generations of this superior race. It forces us to ask how superiority of race works out. In so far as it is character, native ability, and resourcefulness, it will reappear in the children, all the stronger for its trials. In so far as it is acquisition of cultivated usages, access to the implements of culture and entertainment,—libraries, galleries, museums, theatres,—access to the best assemblies, little and great, where the leaders of the race discuss the race's problems, then in so far it is but slightly communicable. We must remember that, although the original settlers carried through their lives an inextinguishable memory

of their earlier experiences in the civilized home country, their descendants gained their experience only from the new environment, and many things were but idle names to them that were precious and vital realities to their parents. Even had these things been wholly real to the children through constant exhortation to hold the old ideals fast, never could these things have possessed the first-hand vividness that only actual experience can give. Such lack of first-hand vividness became a natural barrier between the two civilizations,—all the more since the older civilization was dynamic and changing, and in many ways no longer corresponded to the static memories of those who had made the pilgrimage from its heart.

But as time went on, the reader may ask, what was there to prevent the rising generations from creating a full indigenous civilization of their own? With or without the parallel civilization, other nations have done it—indeed, all nations have done it, else how was any civilization attained? Well, in the first place, note the shortness of the period allowed for a complete coming to national consciousness and accomplishment. Rome was not built in a day. In the second place, note that in calling for a complete culture one is practically assuming the new civilization to move *pari passu* with the old, requiring that the America of 1750 shall be in step with 1750 England, and so a century later, and so now, not to speak of being in step with the highest developments of the rest of the world. A present-day parallel would be the assumption that Australia, New Zealand, Canada, ought to present to the world a civilization at all points equal to the parent English. But I have tried to show that it is imposing an impossible burden to require the conquest of natural, material difficulties along with the keeping up to a parallel level of culture. It is like asking the boy who works for his living to keep up his studies to the pitch attained by the earnest student who gives his whole time to his books.

Nevertheless, one may feel, three centuries are enough, even in the interminable sequence of time, for a nation to come completely to its own. Why has not America done so? The question is as easy to answer as it is to raise. When our forefathers had made their clearing and made their land productive,

had built their cities and established their institutions of learning, had started themselves along the high-road of progress, and saw the future smiling to them, they had it within their power, as it were, to develop intensively the plot of earth they had marked out for their own and to make it bear the richest fruits of the spirit. But this plot of earth was a mere fringe along the Atlantic, and what the first-comers did for their territory, their descendants continuously did for the whole country. West and south, southwest and northwest, the tide of settlement went, and with it the same meeting of primeval conditions, the same conquest, the same hardy energy and initiative of the pioneer, the same bowing to the insistent demands of the material in order that the spiritual might be served at all.

And now it was not like a colony starting out in turn from a colony-nation to make still another independent nation and still another independent culture. The American nation did not remain bound to the Atlantic coast; that which moved into the wilderness, across the prairies, over the mountains and along the great watercourses, was the nation too, every whit of it, binding itself back to its starting-points with travelled roads, and throwing out into the unknown blazed paths that were a bond and a pledge to the future. This epic conquest of a continent, which evoked the adventurous energy of the most daring and the most alert, is one American answer to the question: "Have we come into our own?" But the conquest was not art, it was neither free of corruption nor left incorruption behind it, and it had its great share in perpetuating the problem we are trying to solve.

For it is manifest that if the nation could only have stayed still in one place for a while, it might have worked toward a compact Puritan or Cavalier national artistic culture, and have let the undeveloped hinterland take care of itself. But who would be willing to pay that price for the poems and paintings and symphonies and perfect city government it might have bought? I believe that the pioneer instinct was the right one, and if we had to pay a price for its use, the price was not too high. Our period of unresting territorial expansion postponed our opportunity to flourish in creativeness.

It did more than postpone in the realm of art the complete use of our creative powers. Our territorial expansion diverted no small part of our creative ability into the solution of the difficulties that followed in the way of the pioneers. Step by step we learned to handle matters of material consequence as such matters had never been handled before, and there was an exhilaration in breaking the record and setting a new mark that gave to men of large business an intellectual satisfaction unknown to the small shopkeeper or the small contractor or the small banker. Take but a single instance out of many,—the astonishing development of our means of transportation and communication. The man who imaginatively flung a line of rails across the continent or drew a stranded cable under the ocean from shore to shore, was doing more than anticipating a deed of trade: he was following a dream, and again and again he made it real. And this derives straight from the pioneers. There is, I firmly believe, an unbroken logical line from the man who widened a trail through the woods to the manager of a great railway system, from the man who floated his trading goods down the Ohio on a flatboat to the director of a fleet of ocean liners, from the man who brought the mails on horseback through the wilderness to the future controller of the yet unmeasured destiny of wireless speech.

And now I come to an equally significant but less tangible aspect of the matter,—the effect of the course of our civilization on our language. I can only hint at its processes, for it is a wide-reaching subject. Language dictates thought no less than thought dictates language, and it is of the highest possible consequence for a nation (as it is for an individual) to possess and use freely a flexible, copious, idiomatic speech that shall be able to express a wide range of thought and emotion and action. Our English language is collectively a wonderful medium of expression, but only that part of it which is in fairly constant use can be counted as in the possession of the user. We Americans have made some modifications in the mother tongue (I am not referring to slang or to pronunciation), some of which are valuable and some of which are detrimental, less to the language than to ourselves. In so far as we may have weakened our language, we have injured our own literary potentiality. Have we

done anything, consciously or unconsciously, to restrict its effectiveness? I think that we have.

Let us go back again to pioneer conditions. The men who came to America came with a vocabulary and idiom adapted to the fairly complex character of the civilized life of their day. They found incessant use for only a small part of their possession,—namely, the language of the round of simple daily duties. Those who came over here for religious reasons probably made continued use of their religious vocabulary. But in the main the language must rather soon have acquired a markedly practical quality, it may have undergone an unintentional simplification, and a great deal of it once in use must have become dormant. The growing children used the words they heard, not the words their parents only remembered without using. Books they had, of course, but a word that you recognize only as a book word, never using it and never thinking it, is not your word. Not to dwell longer on this point, I think my readers will agree that the continuous pioneering experience has diminished our native richness of vocabulary.

At some point in the process, I do not know when or how, we apparently became less certain of our idioms. Some of them slipped away, and we were left with less pointed turns of standard speech. Slang did not fill the gap. This impoverishment reacted on our sense of style and command of rhythm. The point, if it be at all tenable, amounts to this: that a youth of literary ambitions, coming into a man's need of a more elastic instrument of speech, was likely to be hampered by his practical unfamiliarity with the capabilities of the language, and hence used speech too colorless or too colloquial, or, at the other extreme, used bookish language that sounded pedantic. It is, of course, impossible to estimate with even a pretence of exactness what influence all this stylistic deficiency may have had on the development of our national letters in respect both of quantity and of quality. I know that writing badly has never seemed to deter anyone anywhere from writing, but inability to write well or speak well very often keeps a person from familiarity with good books, and from the consequent reaction on the reader's own style; so, despite the abundance of poor writing, we may

guess that lack of language has left some possible Miltons mute and inglorious. It is at least reasonable to think that literature will flourish better where its medium, language, is used with potency. To some extent to-day we may trace our national inferiority in speech, compared with the English of our corresponding stations in life, to our inherited poverty (broadly speaking) of vocabulary and idiom. I know of one American professor of English, at any rate, who listens with envy to the spontaneous and authoritative command of his native language possessed by any well-bred English public school boy. And in a great deal of our American literature, I, at least, feel strongly the absence of style and of distinction of manner, and I miss the skill of saying a thing with a joyous artistic sense that that is the one right way to say it. Is it not reasonable to suppose that, with as good brains as the English, our inferiority to them in language is due to some such cause beyond our control as I have suggested? In any event, the fact has a bearing on our literary production.

A friend to whom I was talking after I had written these words, a man whose interest is in the affectionate study of American literature, said to me: "I miss in American authors the richness and power of diction which the British have." I submit this corroborative evidence from a specialist. It brought to my mind again that master of style, Cardinal Newman, and I asked myself how our Lowell or Emerson would stand against him in point of ability to say continually with splendid competence the thing in mind, whatever the thing might be. I thought of Edgar Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*, poignant and searching and utterly American, and asked myself how it would stand against the slender volume of Rupert Brooke, poignant and searching and utterly English. Of course, I am comparing very different things. But what makes them different? Is it only a difference between men's souls, or has not one man been limited perforce to self-acquired adequacy while the other has used freely an ample birthright?

Now this is dealing only with literature, and apparently does not apply to the other arts whose language is less dependent on inherited usage. But literature is not only the greatest of the

arts; it is, in another capacity, the wonderfully serviceable handmaid of all the other arts. It interprets them when need be (though that need is often imagined when it does not at all exist), and it encourages their vogue directly and indirectly by bestowing just praise and apportioning just blame, and by creating that general atmosphere of artistic endeavor which is so important a condition for the flourishing of any art. For, after all, the arts tend to stand or fall together, and what is serviceable to one is in the long run serviceable to all; so that a flourishing literature may open the way to the prosperity of the other arts. I do not wish to prove too much, and I readily admit that writers are sometimes officious and offer their opinions on other arts when silence would have explained just as much and, moreover, would not have increased the quantity of our ignorance. For example, of all writing that consciously tries to be good, I think that in verbal interpretation of musical composition we most frequently come near to the attainment of pure inanity. But our general principle is not affected. Literature leads the way in making all art possible, and a handicapped literature is a handicapped leader. The overcoming of the handicap is a matter of time, in the first place, and in the second a matter of improving our speech so that it may regain its full, flexible, nervous, ample power. It is a good thing to think that each one of us may help in that. A man who deliberately and unpedantically acquires his copious share of thoughtful speech has truly helped in his way to advance American civilization.

In a wholly different field note one other issue of the long-continued pioneer period. Despite its many forced economies, the pioneer way of life is one of the most extravagant and wasteful imaginable. At the edge of a virgin forest who dreams of saving wood? With prairies stretching wide on every hand, who dreams of intensive farming? With boundless resources who dreams of conservation? The habit of using recklessly whatever is easiest, without regard for the morrow, is a pioneer habit, and it has come straight down through the decades to our private and public expenditures and use of resources to-day. Wastefulness, even more than dishonesty, is at the root of graft: for the dishonesty of a few, guarded against by the caution of

many, cannot go far, while the dishonesty of a few, tolerated by the carelessness of many, is foot-loose.

Now comes the next great factor in preventing our early attainment to the high European standard of art and of administrative authority. It is a thing which has immensely helped to make us what we now are, for better and worse. It is one of our national glories; it is temporarily one of our national handicaps, so far as our point at issue is concerned. I mean our colossal foreign immigration.

I add at once that I know full well how much of our artistic development, instead of being hindered by the foreign influx, has been directly due to the men of other nations who came over here, bringing with them from *Patrie* or *Vaterland* an almost holy love of beauty. There are many westerners like myself, of New England ancestry, who found their first experience of what the great world recognized as high art in some French or German home where the ideal of man's varied achievement was high and where sentiment rose to that ideal. And so it was, all over the country, wherever the drift of a superior artistic civilization found lodgment on our shores. I am grateful to these quiet heralds of noble visions, and I acknowledge my own debt.

Yet it is not of the stray *Konzertmeister* or portrait-painter, or even of the frequent family of high breeding and conscious intellectual purpose, that we are speaking. It is of the thirty millions of immigrants who came here within a century, men of all sorts and conditions, to be sure, but, in overwhelming majority, a vast mass of the average, who, instead of bringing us the advantage of a perfected citizenship, came here to find it. And when, again within the century, and mainly through these foreign-born and their American-born offspring, we had an increase of eighty-five millions, then we had two and only two courses open to us: we could be swamped by vast numbers, or we could assimilate vast numbers. We assimilated them, giving them our language, our ideals, our institutions, our habits. It is our greatest national achievement. It was never done before, perhaps it will never be done again, in any country of the world. It is the unique American contribution to the civilization of humanity.



We must not imagine that it could be done without expenditure of energy and without waste. It takes energy to do anything, it takes great energy to perform the tasks of a colossus. Like a benevolent giant, America threw open the doors of the huge mansion to whomsoever would enter, and in making every visitant a sharer in the rights and privileges of the new home, the great Welcomer to the ambitious of the earth made for himself a new labor of Hercules.

Hercules himself—I like this image of our civilization—had no time for art, but he became an inspiration to artists; he cleansed the Augean stables, but then went on his way leaving their future administration to others. The more artist, the more manager, the less Hercules. But a figure of speech is no argument; analogy only illustrates, it does not prove. Our amazing growth in population did not bring an amazing growth in art, and it did bring some amazing political troubles. We went on, patiently, too patiently, in art, and went on, impatiently, perhaps too impatiently, in the solution of our political problems.

Let us count here, too, the increased strain on our language. It is not now the language of Boston or of Charleston; it is the language that is used by a hundred millions everywhere. The American tongue of to-day, spoken by so many to whom it is an acquisition and not a heritage, may be simple, vivacious, hearty; it is not the rich, idiomatic mother-tongue. Reaching the level of our speech, the immigrant did not gain its heights or its depths: he helped to flatten it out. Take a casual proof. The boys and girls who come to college use, on the whole, the better variety of our present speech, and each and all have behind them years of study and drill in the English language and literature. Yet each college runs a hospital course, Freshman English, in a sad-eyed effort to check the diseases of the common speech. And what of the schools in our great cities, where the new generation of foreign descent comes up to be taught the dominant language? Every teacher will complain of the necessity of simplification; of the extreme limitations, self-set, on the vocabulary of the teacher, of the very one whose speech should be a model of richness and variety. This compressing strain on our language militates against the ready, successful use of the verbal material of art.

But when one realizes all the other things we have done, how we have made our very difficulties and sufferings and trials minister to us in overflowing measure, then, perhaps, one will say that there are better things than art in the world, and that we have gained them. I believe that I agree. We have done something no less than tremendous: we have made over a continent, we have made a people. We need not hang our heads because in doing these things successfully we have kept ourselves from equal success in other things.

Yet we have done a goodly share in the other things, too. In view of all that I have tried to make clear, we have done wonderfully. I insist that the wonder is not that we have done so little, but that we have done so much, in literature, in painting, in music; not that we have done so little to perfect the whole vast fabric of our government, but that we have advanced so far toward realizing the aspirations of the founders of the republic. Despite its unremitting dealing with material things, the American mind has retained its intellectual curiosity, its power of introspection, its idealism.

And we do not dream of stopping. That is not in our blood. We are reaching forth to achievement in all the arts and occupations, in every field where a man may make a name and do a deed worthy of our race. The past is but a fragment of universal history; so long is time that nations will disappear, undreamed-of nations arise. The time that is beckoning to us, and that we are hailing through the clear distance, will show us fit to stand with the best. And proud of being Americans, we wait the future, wide-eyed and truly a little wistful, craving the perfect accomplishment. For our day, our American day, will come.

MARTIN W. SAMPSON.

Cornell University.